

An Analysis of the Disadvantaged Position of Ethnic Minorities in Kureishi's "Borderline"

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Abstract— "*Borderline*", a play by Hanif Kureishi, portrays the multi-cultural society of Britain from a variety of perspectives and illustrates the difficulties and disadvantages of ethnic minorities in a society. However, the play does not reflect the situation only from the perspective of the minorities; it tries to compare and contrast all the possible contrary perceptions in order to offer different perspectives. In the play, Kureishi attempts to lay bare the determining influence of cultural baggage on one's understanding of other people and events. This paper aims to illustrate how the characters in the play are shaped by their cultures and what kind of difficulties they experience because of the gap between the dominant culture of the host country and the minority cultures in that society.

Keywords— *Kureishi, Borderline, Ethnic.*

I. INTRODUCTION

British people are described as "an island people 'unconquered' for centuries" (Storry and Childs 10). Hence, they had been away from the influence of other cultures for a long time but this cultural isolation came to an end during the process of decolonization in the post war period. During this time, Britain, just like some of other colonial European countries, faced with an influx of immigrants mostly from her former colonies. The majority of these migrants in Britain were Indians, Pakistanis, and West Indians (Moch 179). As a result of this encounter with culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse groups, a certain degree of hostility and racism grew among British people. As a result, these minorities in Britain went through a very hard process when they initially immigrated to this totally alien environment to them. They suffered from maladaptation deriving both from their different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and from the discriminatory attitudes of British people.

The existing dynamics of post-war Britain; the rich cultural atmosphere, strict policies and controversial political issues, promoted the emergence of migrant literature in 1980s. It constitutes "linguistic works of art whose authors have undergone a major cultural change and, in most cases, linguistic shift. Most commonly, migrant literature focuses on the social, linguistic and psychological experiences and implications of leaving one country and settling in another" (Farago 93). Most of the writers who produce migrant literature are themselves

migrants and generally have hybrid identities. Hanif Kureishi is one of them and has made important contributions to migrant literature with his novels and plays as he is a second-generation immigrant writer. He was born in London in 1954. His father was Pakistani and his mother was English. He studied philosophy at King's College in London. Some of his well-known works include the novels *Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), *The Black Album* (1995), the short story collection *Love in a Blue Time* (1997), the plays "*Borderline*" (1981), "*Outskirts*" (1983) and the screenplays "*My Beautiful Laundrette*" (1986) and "*Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*" (1987) (Drabble 565). Kureishi mainly deals with the inevitable outcomes of migration both for the newcomers and for the home society from an ironic perspective. He displays the awkward situation of immigrants who come to an alien environment in pursuit of a better life and end up being disappointed because of their dysfunctional cultural baggage and the new antagonistic atmosphere surrounding them. He has occasionally been criticized for not properly representing his own origins and also for favouring the European models (Stein 141; Kuortti and Nyman 14). However, he actually scrutinizes the hostile and racist British attitudes along with the ignorant and inconsistent characteristics of migrants. Moore-Gilbert affirms Kureishi's critical approach towards the British society and politics as follows:

Kureishi anatomises the quasi-colonial attitudes, institutional structures and social hierarchies which subordinate such minorities within contemporary British society. The most immediate and dramatic echo of the histories of colonialism occurs in the violence which so often accompanies the racism of the 'host society'. More subtle mechanisms of discrimination are embedded in the job market, educational institutions and housing. Equally evocative of imperialism is the geographical concentration of immigrants in certain areas of the inner city. (3)

As the above paragraph makes it clear, Kureishi is no way taking sides in his representations of existing situation of migrants. He makes references to the stereotypes of both Westerners and Easterners in order to highlight both the cultural gap between them and the prejudices they have against each other.

“Borderline” is one of Kureishi’s plays in which he is concerned with the adaptation problems of migrants, the underlying causes of these problems, and possible ways to eliminate these causes. In the play, Kureishi deals with these issues through depicting the daily experiences of South Asian immigrants in Southall, a suburban district of London, and focusing especially on an immigrant Pakistani family, their relationships within the family, with other immigrants and with the native population. Parker states: “A number of Kureishi’s early plays and screenplays reflect the formation of his concern with the dominant culture’s interest in the exotic” (33). His observation is truly valid for “Borderline”. As he suggests, the European journalist Susan is in a way attracted to Orientals as she finds them different. She is curious about their culture, their mentality, and their relationships. For her, the Oriental is an enigma which she wants to decipher. She expresses her amazement at their attitudes towards life:

You play a game of tennis and you have an umpire and two ball boys magnetized by your every move. You ride for miles in a rickshaw dragged by a skinny fifty-year-old father of seven and you feel so guilty you give him two years’ wages for a tip. If your tea is cold and you complain some poor boy is kicked out of a job and his grandmother starves to death. It’s difficult not to find yourself becoming some kind of fatuous aristocrat. (Kureishi 101)

As the above statements make it clear that she is critical of Orientals, yet she is not prejudiced; she genuinely tries to understand them. She even interviews them in order to make a radio programme about these Orientals. She claims that she is informing concerned people about what these Orientals are going through. However, the driving force for her research is the European passion for the ‘exotic’. She unconsciously regards them as a subject race. Hence, Anwar is right in his claim that she cannot stand for them without reducing their voice. He says “things are always better coming from the patient than the nurse” (Kureishi 132).

Apart from the European interest in the ‘exotic’, Kureishi’s concern for the reciprocal ‘othering’ is what Parker identifies in his early plays (33). This assessment is again true for “Borderline”. Both Europeans and Orientals regard each other as ‘the other’. Europeans ‘othering’ Orientals is generally depicted through their racist acts rather than words. For example, Ravi is spat on in the street and Susan talks about a Bangladeshi woman whose son is attacked by some fascists. The attitude of ‘othering’ pervades in Orientals’ mind, as well. Yasmin is prejudiced against Europeans and says “white people would like an exhibition of my misery” (Kureishi 141).

This discriminatory discourse is also discernible in Amina when she says “I s’pose you want white education. You called it the white lie before. You said they’d whitewashed history. You’ll be playing polo next week” (Kureishi 117). Although Haroon is the one who seems to be more sensible and modern, he cannot keep himself from engaging in racist thoughts. He states: “The English get bad hearts because they have rotten souls and bad consciences” (Kureishi 98). Hence, it is apparent that the racist attitude is adopted by both sides.

In the play, certain stereotypical traits of European and Eastern cultures are reflected in terms of behavioural patterns, beliefs, mores, gender roles, and laws. However, in doing this Kureishi adopts an ironic approach towards the norms of both cultures. For example, the idea that European women have casual sexual relationships is actually parodied by Kureishi in the play. Ravi comes to England with this misconception and soon realizes that this is not the fact. These types of stereotypical behavioural patterns are also attributed to Eastern people. For example, Farook suggests that Pakistani people tend to exaggerate things and Yasmin claims that Asian people are fatalistic. The patriarchal structure of Eastern society is also brought to light through the daily life and familial relationships of the Pakistani family. In the family, Banoo and Amina have no voice at all. They do not have the power to make a decision even about themselves. Banoo explains Susan her position in life: “I get up. I clean the house. I cook for my husband. Then I work. I sew” (126). Amina, on the other hand, has to agree to an arranged marriage just because her father wants her to do so. Only thing Amjad asks for his wife’s and daughter’s opinion is about the colour of the kitchen walls. There is no real communication between them; both Amina and Banoo want to express their problems but Amjad always interrupts them and is not really interested in their problems. Banoo complains to Amjad: “You never let me speak, Amjad” (Kureishi 126). The weak female voice in Eastern society is represented by Amina and Banoo here and the gender roles are questioned. In her relationship with Haroon, Amina points out that things are different for boys (Kureishi 98). She means that their society can readily accept a man’s having a sexual relationship with a woman whereas it is regarded degrading for a woman to have such a relationship with a man. Another sign of the patriarchal structure of Eastern society reflected in the play is that Amjad feels that it is natural for a man to beat a woman when she does something he does not approve of. He hits Amina when he finds out that she has been out at night (Kureishi 128). He also finds Yasmin’s engagement in political activities inappropriate and wonders if her father does not beat her for that (Kureishi 107).

As they are parts of a culture, the systems established in India and also in England, such as politics, laws, and health services, are analyzed and criticized for their deficiencies in the play. For example, Amina repeats a statement she hears from her father: "In India, a policeman won't move before you bribe him – unless it's to hit you" (Kureishi 167). Here, the law system in India is suggested to be corrupt. The inefficiency of the army is also mentioned. Amjad compares European and Indian health service when he asks his wife to call the ambulance as his health gets worse: "They will come in a minute. You see how things are good here. In Pakistan, if you send for an ambulance there is a day's delay – then a hearse arrives" (157). However, ironically, after he utters these words, the audience learn about his death in the next scene. In comparison to India, England is depicted as a dreamland through the perspective of some immigrants such as Amjad and Ravi, yet soon they discover that it is not the fact and that England is just another country which has its own handicaps. Ravi realizes the fact as soon as he gets to England but he feels that he cannot confess his failure to the people in India. He tells them that he has a great life in England and that he has even bought a flat and explains his reasons of his lies to Haroon by stating: "they are sitting in India expecting me to succeed. I can't tell them I caught crabs from a prostitute and sleep in a field. They don't expect me to be doing that in a country that had the world's greatest empire. You can do that in Bombay" (Kureishi 146). Moreover, throughout the play, it is suggested that laws are deficient in England, as well. In addition to these flaws of the system both in India and in England, the decaying values of both peoples are revealed. For example, Indian immigrants do not support each other rather they try to earn more money on them; they have become greedier and more selfish as they have secured their places in society like Haroon's father or Ravi's childhood friend Anil. Hence, they do not want to strive to improve things for others. This degradation in values is also recognizable in English people. Susan, as a European herself, confirms this: "Look. I think that a certain kind of gentleness and mildness associated with English life has gone. Even I can remember a kind of tolerance, a certain respect at the heart of things. All that's evaporating" (Kureishi 133).

Certain things about daily life such as sports, music, education, food and clothes are also distinctive features of cultures. For example, jeans and pop music are associated to European culture and for this reason neither Amjad nor Banoo approves Amina's wearing jeans or listening to pop music. Banoo maintains that Amina used to be a good girl for that she would not do these things before but complains that she has changed a lot (Kureishi 127). Amjad gives a harsher reaction when he learns that

Amina has been out at night wearing European clothes and expresses his disappointment: "We're finished, the family. Become too English. Your mother's said something right. We should have gone back before. We've done completely wrong things (Kureishi 129). Education is also attributed to European culture. Amina calls it "white education" (Kureishi 117). Banoo also states: "Where we come from education is for the rich" (Kureishi 125). However, in Europe, education is an individual right for everyone. As for sports, polo is regarded European whereas tennis is mentioned as if it were an Indian sport sarcastically because it was actually brought to India by British colonialists (Pal 116). Food is another distinctive feature between the two cultures. For example, eating margarine is reflected as a part of European cuisine and is considered unacceptable by Amjad because he thinks there is pig fat in it.

Hybridity is another striking cultural trait in the play. The first generation immigrants in the play, Amjad and Banoo, seem to keep their cultural identity to a certain extent, yet the second generation immigrants, Amina, Haroon, Yasmin, and Farook, display a hybrid generation. They no longer represent Eastern culture, yet they do not belong to European culture, either. Farook confesses this to Amina saying: "I can see you're much more Western than he [Amjad] said. But I'm Western. We are the new modern kind of Pakistani" (Kureishi 154). Although Farook claims to be a Westerner, he is actually a hybrid character just like the others. Neither Farook nor the other second generation immigrants are totally assimilated by European culture, they only turn out to be a new kind. They have difficulties both in conforming to Eastern norms and in adapting to European life style. The play reveals the gradual transformation of the generation. For example, at the beginning of the play, we understand that Haroon has been having a sexual relationship with Amina but he is still ashamed to talk about it and does not approve of Amina's talking about sex. Nonetheless, towards the end of the play, it is easily discernible that he leaves all his inhibitions behind as we hear him say: "Amina, let's have fun with our bodies while we're still alive" (Kureishi 137). Amina goes through a slow phase of transformation, as well. At first, she seems to accept her parent's restrictions and is afraid to defy them. She cannot resist the arranged marriage although she loves Haroon. However, in the end, she rejects all of the restrictions on her and tries to find her own way. Yasmin goes through the same stages as Amina but she experiences them long before Amina and the audience only learns about them from Yasmin's remarks.

The play reveals not only the cultural diversities among the Asian immigrants and native population but also the unequal positions of these immigrants in British society.

Therefore, it is also necessary to identify the causes of this inequality. In *Contemporary British Society*, two diverse explanations are offered for the disadvantaged position of black immigrants. The first view maintains that the British class structure is responsible for it and that their disadvantaged position does not derive from their skin colour or different ethnicity but from their class status which also involves many white people (Abercrombie et al 257). Hence, it is implied that immigrant people themselves are responsible for their position in society as their social status is determined by economic circumstances which can be improved by better education or hard work. The second view attributes the inequality in the society to British people and claims that their racist attitudes are responsible for it (Abercrombie et al 258-259). As the underlying causes of the disadvantaged position of Asian immigrants are designated to be different by these two points of views, the solutions they offer are different, as well. Considering the first view, the solution might be immigrants' improving themselves. They might get educated, find better jobs, and try to adapt to European way of life. The second view, on the other hand, would support improving the existing education system in Britain, passing laws that would equalize the status of Europeans and immigrants, and encouraging Europeans to be more tolerant of cultural and ethnic differences. These suggestions in terms of eliminating ethnic inequalities are offered in the play through some characters' view points. For example, it is easy to recognize the ideas offered by the first explanation in Haroon's remarks: "You people, you come from villages, you've still got village mentalities, and English people will always treat you like fucking villagers (Kureishi 150). Here, Haroon blames the immigrants for their disadvantaged position in society stating that they are illiterate and for that reason he finds English people's discriminatory attitudes justified. The solution he offers is therefore along the lines of the first view. He expresses his views to Amina: "We've got to engage in the political progress. Not just put out fires when they start them. Yasmin and Anwar – they are brave. But they are separatist. I say we've got to get educated. Get educated and get inside things" (Kureishi 118). As it is clear from his statements, for him, education is the key solution. However, Yasmin and Anwar are activists and they represent the second view that accuses British racism for the inequality. Yasmin finds Haroon's struggle for getting a better education to improve things ineffective and says: "We know you and what you want, what you think you're leaving for. You want to be a lawyer, eh? Because you believe in slow progress, using existing machinery. But we can't wait for the race relations board to prosecute someone. People are being burnt to death." (Kureishi

148). She asserts that they are against "[p]assport raids, harassment, interrogation, repatriation by intimidation, detention centres at Heathrow Airport" (Kureishi 149). Hence, her suggestion in order to eliminate ethnic inequalities is to improve the existing systems in Britain.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Kureishi analyzes the society in the best way: he marks the misconceptions and prejudiced opinions about cultures and parodies them in the play. He depicts the multicultural structure of Britain and reveals the problems it brings to all members of the society. However, he is not against a multicultural society; what he tries to do is to lay bare the conditions from different perspectives and offer different solutions.

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